

Getting closer to homeland security

BY HANK HOGAN, IT CORRESPONDENT

LIKE ANY GOOD PURCHASING AGENT, THE US GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION (GSA) WANTS TO GET THE MOST FOR ITS CUSTOMER'S MONEY. SO IT LEVERAGES THE BUYING POWER OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, TO THE TUNE OF \$26.3 BILLION IN 2008.

That power is used for more than to simply drive prices down. An example of this can be found in the opening up of the security-related GSA Schedule 84 contract in September 2008 to state and local governments. The contract covers such things as the communications devices and other equipment used by first responders.

In addition to potentially saving money, that change could have another important benefit for local first responders rushing to a disaster, Josh Sawislak, GSA acting chief emergency response and recovery officer, told *Homeland Security Today*. "They can buy the same equipment under the same contract that the feds can buy, and you have a better pathway to interoperability."

Floods and flu

GSA's involvement with homeland security is bigger than Schedule 84, though. GSA also provides disaster support to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other agencies before, during and after an incident.

Disaster support, of course, is easier to provide for known periodic threats, such as hurricanes or wildfires. If two or more disasters are happening at the same time, the Office of Emergency Response and Recovery will coordinate GSA's efforts through an emergency operations center in Washington, DC.

GSA's support can also be vital long after a calamity has faded from the headlines. A case in point was last year's Iowa flood, which damaged the federal courthouse in downtown Cedar Rapids. As a result, GSA had to find space for the courts, doing so first in a shopping mall and later in a more permanent, although temporary, location.

Sawislak reported a change in GSA's approach to such disruptions. In the past, planning for such events involved binders full of specific steps and other information

designed to deal with the situation.

The problem is that life—and disasters—can be unpredictable. For example, pandemic flu planning long assumed that the disease would arise in Asia from bird flu, with as much as six weeks of buildup before it hit America. Instead, swine flu came from Mexico and was in the United States within hours.

As a result, GSA now approaches the

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issue of dealing with disasters in terms of enterprise risk management, looking at what it does and attempting to ensure the continuation of its core mission. "We want to look at how we do our job every day, regardless of what happens to our critical people, systems and data," said Sawislak.

Dealing with disruptions may mean installing a failover system with teleworkers to handle the load. Alternatively, it may entail accepting the risk of failure because the resources needed for mitigation are too great. GSA is finishing up its internal analysis, which will then have to be followed by implementation.

Keeping everybody on schedule

While GSA itself is preparing to carry on in the event of catastrophe, it's also making it potentially easier for others to do likewise. The result could be some extra revenue for vendors that are ready.

Peter Ostrow is president and chief executive officer of Technical Communities of San Bruno, Calif. The company helps others

sell to government agencies, thanks in part to its contract management services and knowledge of GSA schedules. These schedules cover everything from precision instruments to IT hardware to physical security and security in general. The latter is covered by Schedule 84.

Ostrow said the push to expand Schedule 84 seems to involve more than GSA itself. "It appears the government is promoting the use of the Schedule 84 contract down to the state and local level."

Because the definition of what's security-related can be very broad, Schedule 84 can encompass a great many items. These can run the gamut from the orange vests worn by road workers to cameras that work over the Internet to laptops to guns. What's more, just which schedule on which an item appears can depend upon the item's use. A router, for example, would seem to belong on Schedule 70, the IT contract. However, if it's being used to encrypt or decrypt a packet, it may show up on Schedule 84.

Knowing on which schedule something belongs can be tricky. What's more, sometimes a schedule may demand exclusivity, meaning that an item that appears on it cannot show up on another schedule. Schedule 84 is not one of those, though, said Ostrow.

A place to call home

One of GSA's key interactions with homeland security is taking place at the new DHS headquarters slated to be built in southeast Washington. All told, several million square feet of new buildings will be constructed or old buildings will be adapted to house DHS and other agencies. The cost will run in the hundreds of millions of dollars, with the project complicated by the historic St. Elizabeth's asylum buildings on site.

Frank Pugliese, a former commissioner of GSA who until recently was head of DuPont's federal division, thinks that GSA could play a bigger role with DHS, either through purchasing goods and services, leasing vehicles, managing property or other means. At the same time, though, he noted that GSA is interacting with DHS in a significant way.

Speaking of the headquarters project already underway and GSA, he told *Homeland Security Today*, "Their single most important connect point with DHS, and it is a very major one, will be and is the construction of the headquarters." **HST**